

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee
on Forests and Public Land
Management, Committee on Energy and
Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

February 1999

NATIONAL FORESTS

Funding the Sawtooth National Recreation Area





United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

**Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division**

B-281624

February 11, 1999

The Honorable Larry E. Craig
Chairman, Subcommittee on Forests
and Public Land Management
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In 1972, the Congress established the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA) in central Idaho to ensure the preservation and protection of the area's natural, scenic, historic, pastoral, and fish and wildlife values and to provide for the enhancement of the associated recreational values. The SNRA is part of the Sawtooth National Forest and is administered by the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service. As we reported in 1990, the SNRA, as well as other national recreation areas, had not been developed, operated, and maintained up to the levels and standards called for in Forest Service policy and in individual recreation areas' plans, primarily because of funding shortfalls.¹ The report noted that 663 campsites included in the SNRA's plan and needed to support visitor trends had not been built and that visitor services, such as ranger patrols in the wilderness and evening and weekend walks and talks at the campgrounds, had been severely curtailed. Concerned that these shortfalls are continuing and that the Forest Service may not be fulfilling its mission of enhancing the recreational values in the SNRA, you asked us to provide information on funding for the Recreation Area, its accomplishments and unmet needs, and on agency actions that have had adverse impacts on the area.

As agreed with your office, this report specifically addresses (1) the funds allocated to the SNRA for fiscal years 1993 through 1997; (2) spending for fiscal years 1993 through 1997 to enhance recreation, to preserve conservation values, such as fish and wildlife, and to manage commodity programs, such as grazing, and the accomplishments and unmet needs in these areas; (3) the funds not allocated or the funds allocated and then taken back from the Recreation Area for fiscal years 1993 through 1997 and what was done with those funds; and (4) some examples of potentially adverse effects of how the Recreation Area is managed on individuals, companies, and communities economically dependent on the area.

¹National Forests: Special Recreation Areas Not Meeting Established Objectives (GAO/RCED-90-27, Feb. 5, 1990).

Results in Brief

The Sawtooth National Recreation Area's overall annual budget allocation decreased in constant (inflation adjusted) dollars from about \$4.88 million in 1993 to about \$2.25 million in 1997—a decrease of about 54 percent.² This rather large decrease is somewhat misleading—1993 was the second year of a 2-year funding peak in the Recreation Area's budgets. These peak budgets contained (1) special funding for recreation management that dramatically decreased in the 1994 budget, (2) funds for the construction of recreation facilities, and (3) funds for land acquisition. If these categories of funds are consistently excluded from the Recreation Area's 1993 and 1997 budget allocations, the overall budget allocation decrease would have been about 26 percent. In comparison, the 5-year budget allocation decrease for the Sawtooth National Forest was about 18 percent. At the same time, the budget for the Forest Service region containing the Sawtooth National Recreation Area decreased about 1.6 percent, and the total Forest Service budget decreased about 12 percent.³

The Sawtooth National Recreation Area reduced spending between fiscal years 1993 and 1997 for activities such as enhancing recreation, preserving conservation values (such as fish and wildlife), and managing commodity programs (mining, grazing, and timber harvesting). Spending for enhancing recreation decreased from \$1.8 million in 1993 to \$783,100 in 1997—a decrease of about 57 percent. Similarly, spending to preserve conservation values decreased 21 percent, from \$586,200 in 1993 to \$461,200 in 1997. Spending for commodities programs decreased 44 percent, from \$253,200 in 1993 to \$141,600 in 1997. However, just as with the overall budget, the size of these decreases is somewhat misleading because of the funds included for special projects and construction in the 1993 budget. If the funds for these special projects and construction are excluded, spending decreased 19 percent for enhancing recreation from 1993 through 1997, and expenditures for preserving conservation values decreased 9 percent. Spending for commodity programs increased by 4 percent. Nevertheless, Recreation Area officials cited a number of accomplishments under each of these functions. In recreation management, the Recreation Area reconstructed a popular campground at Redfish Lake and began constructing the Harriman Trail, work that resulted in part from partnership funding from such sources as the state of Idaho, local governments, and private donors. In conservation,

²All dollar amounts are expressed in constant 1997 dollars to represent the actual purchasing power of the dollars spent and to make budget numbers comparable across the years covered.

³The budget figures for the Forest Service were obtained from the Service's Final Planning and Budget Advice documents for each year.

the Recreation Area completed environmental impact statements for the Salmon River Corridor and the Sawtooth Wilderness, and in commodity programs, reclaimed three abandoned mine sites. The Recreation Area's officials also stated that because of funding shortages, a number of needs were still unmet, such as the construction of an additional 663 campsites, the reconstruction of facilities such as visitor centers, the maintenance of trails in the wilderness, and the completion of plans for managing grazing lands.

We did not identify any instances in which funds that were allocated to the Recreation Area were subsequently taken back for use by other Forest Service units. We did, however, identify several instances in which funds, rather than being allocated to the Recreation Area, were held at the regional or the forest offices to fund region- or forestwide projects. The funding for these projects comes off the top of the regional and forest budgets before funds are subsequently allocated to the Recreation Area. Overall, 28 projects totaling about \$37.5 million fell into the regionwide project category. They involved a wide range of projects, such as improving the geographic information system⁴ and upgrading computers. Two other projects totaling \$305,000 fell into the forestwide project category. These projects included radio replacements and improving the geographic information system. The overall effect on the Sawtooth National Recreation Area of withholding the funding for these region- and forestwide projects was equivalent to \$116,400 per year, or less than 4 percent of the Recreation Area's budget, because the funding was withheld from all of the units within the region and not just from the Recreation Area. Any adverse impact on the Sawtooth National Recreation Area was further reduced because the Recreation Area benefited from some of these projects.

Overall, representatives from local governments affected by how the Sawtooth National Recreation Area is managed said that the Forest Service has done a good job of preserving the values that the Recreation Area was created to preserve. However, they said that the declining budgets for the Recreation Area have reduced its ability to meet recreational needs by, for example, preventing the Recreation Area from maintaining trails and building new campsites. In addition to the budget impacts, outfitters that take visitors on raft and horse-pack trips through the area and cattle ranchers that have grazing privileges in the Recreation Area said they were adversely affected by various Recreation Area actions.

⁴The geographic information system is a computerized mapping tool that the Forest Service uses to identify social, economic, and ecological trends.

The Recreation Area placed restrictions and increased requirements on river outfitters, limited the size of groups that horse-pack outfitters can take on wilderness trips, and reduced the amount of grazing allowed on its lands. We found that the actions taken by the Recreation Area that affected these groups were, for the most part, taken to protect endangered salmon, rangelands, and wilderness—rather than because of funding reductions. Our review showed that from a monetary standpoint, some ranchers who had large reductions in their grazing privileges were adversely affected. The effect of increased requirements on river and horseback outfitters is less clear because of factors that can affect river outfitters' revenues and actions being taken by the Recreation Area to mitigate restrictions on horse-pack outfitters.

Background

The SNRA is the largest of the 38 national recreation areas within the United States. National recreation areas are areas within the National Forest System that have outstanding combinations of outdoor recreation opportunities, scenery, and proximity to potential users. They may also have cultural, historic, and other values contributing to public enjoyment. The SNRA comprises 754,000 acres in four Idaho counties—Custer, Blaine, Elmore, and Boise. Within the SNRA's boundaries lie portions of five mountain ranges, the headwaters of five major rivers, and over 1,000 lakes. The SNRA's forests, valleys, and barren ridges are home for a variety of wildlife species, including mountain goat, bighorn sheep, elk, moose, and deer. The lakes and streams provide important habitat for native fish populations as well as spawning grounds⁵ for chinook and sockeye salmon, which are listed and protected as threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Visitors to the SNRA take trips on horseback and float-boats, camp, ski, and enjoy a variety of other recreational activities. (See app. I for a map of the Recreation Area.)

Forest Service policy calls for its special recreation areas to be managed as showcases to demonstrate national forest management standards for programs, services, and facilities. While the policy does not define the term "showcase," Forest Service officials interpret it to mean that these areas should be developed and managed to a noticeably higher standard than other Forest Service recreation units. The legislation creating the SNRA provides that the management, utilization, and disposal of natural resources on federal lands—such as timber, grazing, and mineral

⁵Salmon hatch in inland streams; swim to the Pacific Ocean, where they mature; and then return to the same streams where they hatched to reproduce. During the reproduction process, the females develop nests, called redds, into which they deposit their eggs, an activity referred to as spawning. After the eggs are fertilized by the males, the adult salmon die.

resources—could continue insofar as their utilization does not substantially impair the purposes for which the Recreation Area was created.

Funding levels for the SNRA for the period from 1993 through 1997 were developed through a two-part process. First, Forest Service budgets were developed through a largely bottom-up process. Based on guidance derived from plans and the funds likely to be available, the lowest-level units, such as ranger districts and recreation areas, developed and presented their funding requests to successively higher units—forests, regions, the Washington headquarters—where the requests were consolidated and prioritized. (Fig. II.1 shows the Forest Service's organization to include regions, forests, and recreation areas.) These requests provided the basis for the total Forest Service budget requests that were presented to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations for their review, revision, and approval. Once the budgets were enacted, Forest Service headquarters allocated funds to each of its nine regions. The regions, in turn, allocated funds to individual forests, and the forests then allocated funds to the ranger districts and recreation areas.

In 1996, the Forest Service revised its budget development and allocation process. The Forest Service now uses a more top-down approach through which it allocates funds to the regions based on a series of national criteria. In 1998, the region responsible for the SNRA began using similar criteria to allocate funds within the region. The Forest Service made the change because it believes that using the allocation criteria improves the objectivity and rationality of the budget as a process for establishing policy and program priorities. The criteria establish a visible and rational basis for allocating resources by identifying differences among units in terms of resource conditions, workload, production capabilities, and other elements.

The SNRA is one of five units within the Sawtooth National Forest. The other four units are ranger districts. Special recreation areas, such as the SNRA, are designated by specific legislative acts, and typically, the legislation directs the Secretary of Agriculture to manage these areas in a manner that best provides for public outdoor recreation benefits and the conservation of scenic, scientific, historic, and other values. In contrast, ranger districts are administratively established units responsible for the broad range of activities covered by the Forest Service's multiple-use mission, which includes managing timber harvesting, mining, and grazing

as well as recreation. The Sawtooth National Forest is, in turn, part of the Forest Service's Intermountain Region, which contains 16 forests.

The yearly allocations to the SNRA contain a variety of funding categories. Three accounts are particularly important in terms of their impact on the SNRA. First, the National Forest System account, which is by far the largest, provides funding for a number of different functions such as recreation management, protection of threatened and endangered species, and rangeland management. The two other accounts are construction and land acquisition; the sizes of these two accounts vary substantially from year to year, depending on whether construction projects or land acquisitions are approved.

The SNRA's Budget Decreased by Over 50 Percent From 1993 to 1997, but Special Circumstances Help Explain the Large Decrease

The SNRA's budget decreased by 54 percent in constant dollars from 1993 through 1997. However, special circumstances make the decrease misleadingly large. The SNRA's budget for 1993 was part of a 2-year funding peak brought about by the funding of several special projects. After we controlled for these special circumstances, the SNRA's budget decrease for the 5-year period was about 26 percent. The SNRA's decrease compares with about an 18-percent decrease for the Sawtooth National Forest, a 1.6-percent decrease for the region that includes the SNRA, and about a 12-percent decrease for the Forest Service as a whole.

The Forest Service's budget records show that the SNRA's total budget decreased from \$4.88 million in 1993 to \$2.25 million in 1997 in constant dollars. The SNRA's staff also decreased. The number of full-time staff decreased from 31 to 29, and the number of seasonal staff providing visitor services and maintenance decreased from 75 to 26 during the 1993-97 period. Although the SNRA's budget and staffing decreased during this period, SNRA officials said that recreation use ranged from about 1.2 million to 1.3 million visitor days per year between 1993 and 1997.⁶

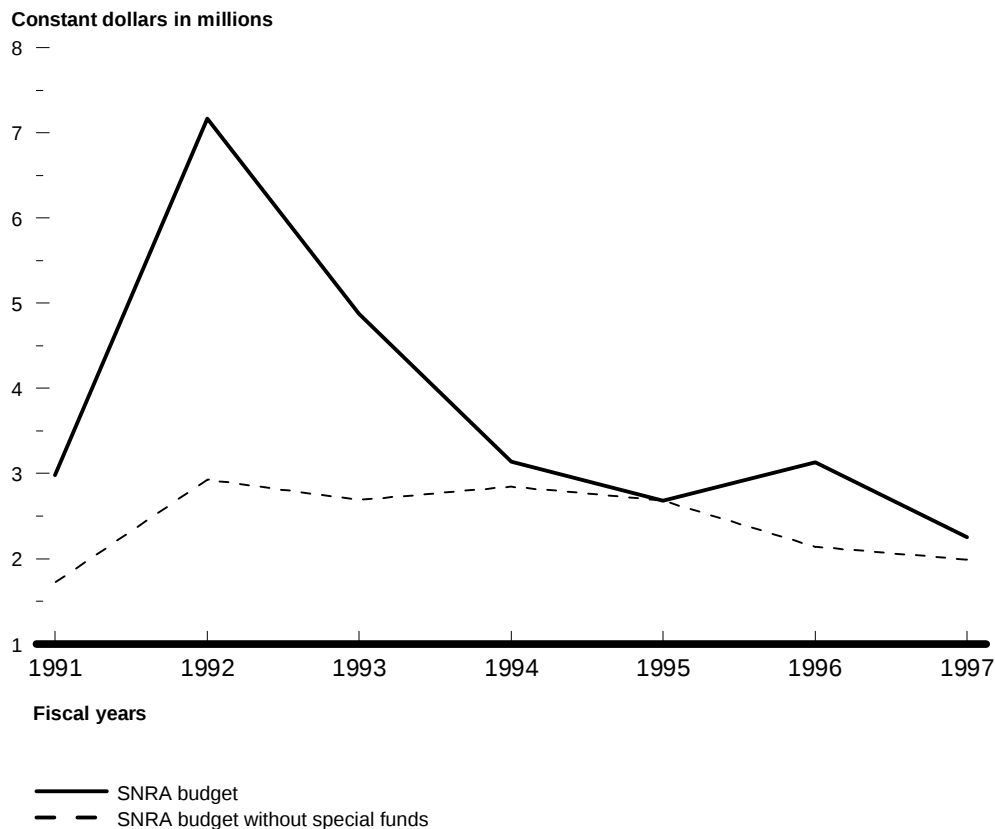
Because of the magnitude of the decrease in funding over the 1993-97 period, we reviewed the area's yearly budgets over a somewhat longer period to identify the reasons for the decrease. The funding trend for the SNRA for the 1991-97 period is shown in figure 1. As figure 1 shows, fiscal years 1992 and 1993 were peak funding years for the SNRA. Three factors account for the funding peak and help to explain a large part of the 54-percent decrease from 1993 through 1997. In 1993, the SNRA received a variety of special funds, including \$365,000 for recreation management and

⁶Visitor days are computed from the number of visitors and the number of hours of their visits.

\$446,000 for the construction of recreation facilities as part of a special multiyear initiative aimed at improving recreation programs throughout the Forest Service. In addition, the SNRA received \$659,000 for land acquisition. The availability of these special funds decreased dramatically from 1993 to 1994 when the recreation initiative ended. The 1997 budget contained no funds for special projects, construction of recreation facilities, or land acquisition.⁷ However, the fiscal year 1997 allocation included \$260,000 for recreation road construction. Our analysis shows that if these types of funds are consistently excluded from the 1993 and 1997 budgets, the decrease in the SNRA's budget from 1993 through 1997 was about 26 percent.

⁷From 1993 through 1997, the Congress appropriated funds for two specific land acquisitions at the SNRA—\$600,000 in 1993 (\$659,000 in 1997 dollars) and \$800,000 in 1997. However, the \$800,000 does not appear in the SNRA's budget allocation because the region does not allocate land acquisition funds to the SNRA until acquisitions are made. In this case, the purchase was not made.

Figure 1: Trend in the SNRA's Budgets, 1991-97



Notes: Fiscal year 1995 was the only year in which the SNRA received no special funds. In fiscal 1992, the SNRA received \$2.73 million in land acquisition funds. All figures are in 1997 constant dollars.

Source: Forest Service data.

A comparison of the trend in the SNRA's budget with budget trends for the forest, the region, and the Forest Service shows that the SNRA's budget decrease was part of a general funding decrease that affected all levels. The Sawtooth National Forest determines, within the limits of its own budget, how much the SNRA receives each year. The forest's budget decreased by 18 percent over the 1993-97 period. The budget allocation for the Intermountain Region, which allocates funds to the Sawtooth National Forest and all other forests within the region, decreased by 1.6 percent

during the same period. Forest Service officials told us that the Sawtooth National Forest's budget had a larger decrease than the region's because the priority of the Sawtooth Forest compared with that of the other forests in the region decreased over the period. The changes in the region's, the forest's, and the SNRA's budgets have occurred within the context of the Forest Service's annual national budgets, which decreased from \$3.2 billion to \$2.8 billion, or about 12 percent, over the 5-year period.

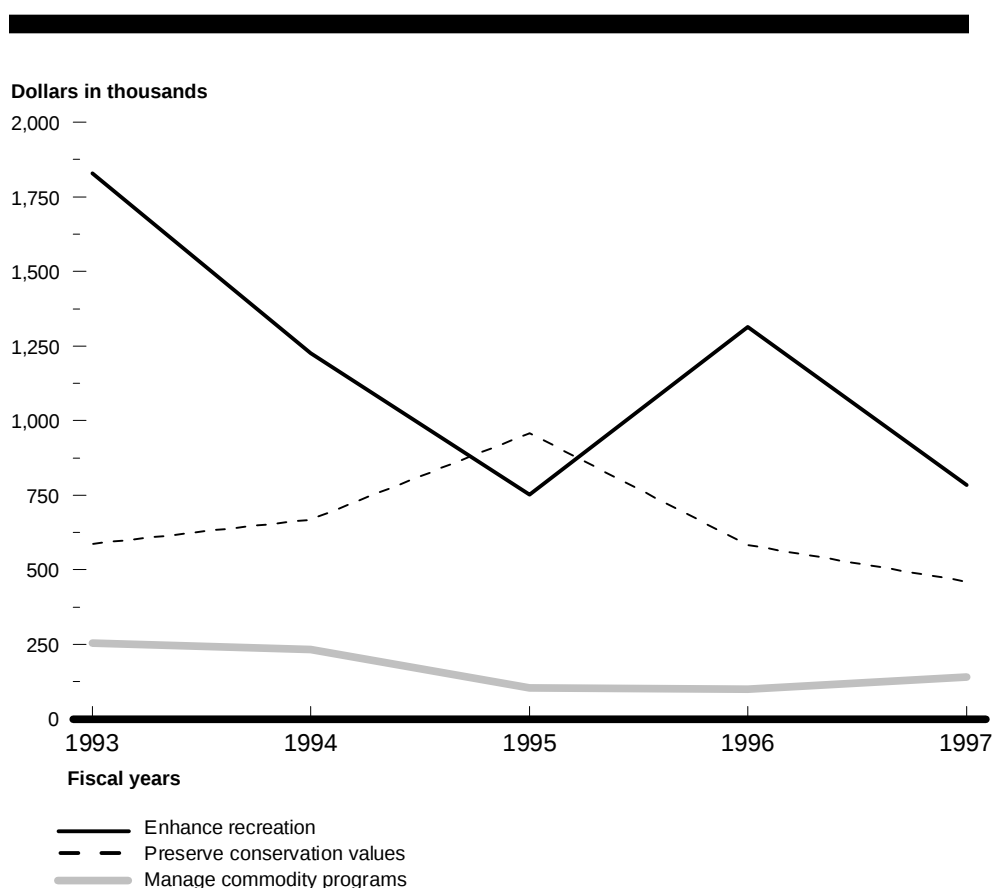
With the fiscal year 1996 budget, the Forest Service changed how it allocates funds to its regions to a process called criteria-based budgeting. The Forest Service changed this process to sharpen the focus on objectives and to establish a rational basis for allocating resources. In fiscal year 1998, the Intermountain Region began using a similar process for allocating funds to forests. According to regional office officials, the new criteria-based process further reduced the SNRA's budget. Two of the new criteria used to allocate recreation management funds in the 1998 budget process were the number of visitors and the developed site capacity—that is, the capacity of the area to handle visitors. These two criteria provided the basis for over 60 percent of the SNRA's 1998 recreation management budget allocation. According to agency officials, recreation areas such as the SNRA do not compete well in the new criteria-based budget process because they have fewer recreation visitors and less capacity than other Forest Service units such as ranger districts located near urban areas. To prevent the continued decline in the SNRA's budget, the regional office has ensured that for fiscal year 1999, the SNRA will be funded at no less than fiscal year 1997 levels for the following accounts: (1) National Forest System, which funds functions such as recreation management; (2) construction; and (3) fire management. (App. III provides additional information on the budgets for the SNRA and other Forest Service units.) Furthermore, starting with the fiscal year 2000 budget, the region has modified the criteria to provide the recreation areas with a larger portion of the region's recreation management funds.

The SNRA's Spending Has Decreased for Recreation, Conservation, and Commodity Programs

In 1997, enhancing recreation, preserving conservation values, and managing commodity programs accounted for 63 percent of the SNRA's total spending. Our analysis of agency data shows that the SNRA's spending for these programs for fiscal years 1993 through 1997 decreased—57 percent for enhancing recreation, 21 percent for preserving conservation values, and 44 percent for managing commodity programs. As with the SNRA's overall budget, the change in spending for these areas was misleadingly large because of the special funds allocated to the SNRA

in 1993. SNRA officials said that the Recreation Area had significant accomplishments in the recreation, conservation, and commodity programs since 1993. However, the officials also said that each program still has unmet needs. Figure 2 shows the trend in expenditures for each of these areas.

Figure 2: Spending for Recreation, Conservation, and Commodity Programs, 1993-97



Notes: "Enhance recreation" includes the budget line items for recreation management and the construction of recreation facilities and trails. "Preserve conservation values" includes the line items for wildlife and fisheries habitat management and wilderness and ecosystem management. "Manage commodity programs" includes the line items for rangeland management, forestland management, and mineral and geology management. All figures are in constant 1997 dollars and include the funds allocated for special projects.

Source: Forest Service data.

Enhancing Recreation

The SNRA's spending for enhancing recreation decreased from \$1.8 million in 1993 to \$783,100 in 1997—a decrease of about 57 percent. Funding for enhancing recreation includes funds for recreation management and the construction of recreation facilities and trails. (See table IV.1 for more detailed information.) In support of its recreation program, the SNRA is responsible for maintaining over 75 developed recreational facilities that include campsites, picnic areas, boat launches, scenic overlooks, and trailheads with 750 miles of trails. It also provides dispersed recreation activities that include camping, hunting, facilities for off-road vehicles, customer service patrols, interpretive programs, and visitor centers. A large portion of the 57-percent decrease in spending occurred because funds from the multiyear recreation initiative program, which ended in 1993, were no longer appropriated. If the funds for that initiative and other special projects are excluded from the analysis, we estimate that spending in 1993 would have been about \$970,000. Thus, the change from 1993 to 1997 would have shown a decrease of about \$187,000, or about 19 percent. While spending for recreation decreased, visitation to the SNRA over the 5-year period remained relatively constant, ranging from about 1.2 million to 1.3 million visitor days.

Despite these reductions in spending for enhancing recreation and the reductions in seasonal staff previously mentioned, SNRA officials told us they had made significant accomplishments since 1993. They said that in addition to providing for day-to-day operations, they had been able to continue providing the same recreational services to the public (such as camping), to renovate some camping facilities, and to expand the availability of trails through partnership projects with state, local, and private donors that constructed new trails and maintained existing trails. In 1996, the SNRA completed the renovation of a major campground at Redfish Lake and, in 1997, awarded a contract to construct the Harriman Trail that will run through an 18-mile stretch in the Recreation Area. SNRA officials also said that the recreation program still has unmet needs in a wide range of areas, such as in its dispersed recreation programs, customer service patrols, interpretive programs, and visitor centers. They said they have been unable to construct an additional 663 needed campsites; to reconstruct and rehabilitate deteriorating facilities, such as visitor centers, trailheads, and camp or day-use facilities; to maintain about one-third of the trails; or to inspect recreational residences (summer homes) and other facilities to ensure that they comply with the requirements in their permits. They said the SNRA has also been unable to keep visitor information desks open to adequately serve visitors, maintain adequate customer service staff in the field, or provide interpretive

programs that enhance the public's enjoyment of the SNRA. In addition, officials said that other factors besides changes in the funds available for this program affect what can and cannot be accomplished in the recreation program. In particular, reductions in funds for other programs such as land acquisition have required the recreation program to cover a higher percentage of costs for receptionist, payroll, and public affairs personnel in the SNRA. According to these officials, the impacts of these reductions have had a direct effect on accomplishments and have resulted in more unmet needs in the recreation program. (See app. V for more information on specific accomplishments and unmet needs.)

Preserving Conservation Values

The SNRA's spending to preserve conservation values decreased 21 percent, from \$586,200 in 1993 to \$461,200 in 1997. If the special funding contained in the 1993 budget is excluded from the analysis, however, we estimate that spending in 1993 would have been about \$505,000. Thus the change in spending from 1993 to 1997 would have been a reduction of about \$44,000, or about 9 percent. Preserving conservation values is a pervasive effort at the SNRA. Every resource activity at the SNRA includes major provisions for preserving conservation values, according to the SNRA's Acting Area Ranger. The main focus of the conservation efforts has been on protecting threatened and endangered species and protecting key wilderness values, such as protecting the primitive nature of wilderness and maintaining the opportunity for solitude, in the 217,000-acre Sawtooth Wilderness. The Snake River chinook and sockeye salmon, which spawn in the SNRA, and the Snake River steelhead trout are protected under provisions of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. In addition, the Columbia River bull trout is currently proposed for listing as a threatened species. As a result of these endangered species listings, the SNRA must do what it can to improve the habitat for these species and ensure that its actions do not have an adverse effect on the fish. The Sawtooth Wilderness Area was created by the 1972 act that established the SNRA and must be managed to meet the requirements set out in the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Wilderness Act requires that wilderness areas remain undeveloped to retain their primeval character and be managed to preserve their natural conditions. Wilderness areas should also provide opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. As the use of the Sawtooth Wilderness for recreational purposes increases, the SNRA must, among other things, limit and distribute use to conserve the wilderness values.

According to SNRA officials, their major accomplishments since 1993 in preserving conservation values include (1) completing an environmental

impact statement aimed at improving riparian ecosystems and protecting salmon habitat throughout the Salmon River Corridor;⁸ (2) eliminating barriers to fish migration; and (3) issuing the SNRA Wilderness Management Plan. SNRA officials also said that the conservation program still has unmet needs. They said they are unable to perform a number of activities that would contribute to improving the habitat for, and thus the health and diversity of, the species within the SNRA. The SNRA also has been unable to maintain trails in the wilderness and fulfill its 1993 Wilderness Implementation Schedule, which it created to enable the Recreation Area to meet the management practices, standards, and guidelines outlined in the Forest Plan for the Sawtooth Wilderness for 1994 to 1997. In addition, as in the recreation program, officials said that the reduction in funds for other programs has resulted in the conservation program's covering a higher percentage of the cost for some SNRA personnel. This has an impact on the accomplishments and contributes to more unmet needs in the conservation program. (See app. V for more information on specific accomplishments and unmet needs.)

Managing Commodity Programs

The SNRA's spending for commodity programs decreased 44 percent, from \$253,200 in 1993 to \$141,600 in 1997. However, if the 1993 allocation for projects totaling \$120,000 is excluded from the analysis,⁹ this area would have experienced a 4-percent increase in spending from 1993 through 1997. The commodity programs include programs for grazing, timber, and mining. In 1997, the grazing program had 26 range allotments—19 for cattle and 7 for sheep—covering 400,500 acres, more than half of the SNRA's land area. The allotments provided that 2,500 cows and 4,470 sheep could graze for a total of 21,000 animal unit months.¹⁰ The timber program primarily provides firewood and fence posts to meet the needs of local users. Commercial timber sales, which are also part of the timber program, are limited to small-scale operations for posts and firewood because the area contains only minor amounts of commercial sawtimber. The mining program in the SNRA is very small. The act creating the SNRA provided that new mining claims could no longer be filed. From 1972 through 1997, active mining claims decreased from approximately 6,000 to

⁸Riparian areas are the banks around streams, rivers, and other wetlands. The Salmon River Corridor is a 30-mile length of the upper main Salmon River from its source close to the community of Smiley Creek, past the city of Stanley, to the eastern border of the SNRA.

⁹The \$120,000 funded projects covering the Snake River Basin mitigation, forest vegetation, mountain pine beetles, and wolverines.

¹⁰An animal unit month is defined as the amount of forage needed to support a 1,000-pound cow, a horse, or five sheep for 1 month.

approximately 170. Currently, there are no commercial mining operations on the SNRA's lands.

According to SNRA officials, one of the major accomplishments for the commodity programs is that grazing continues within the SNRA despite the requirements placed on grazing to protect the habitat of the threatened or endangered salmon. Other accomplishments include improvements to riparian areas and the reclamation of abandoned mines. SNRA officials also identified unmet needs. For example, the Recreation Area was unable to complete, on schedule, plans for managing grazing on Sawtooth lands. As with the recreation and conservation programs, officials said that the reduction in funds for other programs has an impact on the accomplishments and unmet needs in the commodity programs. (See app. V for more information on specific accomplishments and unmet needs.)

Funds Devoted to Region- and Forestwide Projects Reduced the SNRA's Budget

We identified several instances in which funds were held at the Intermountain Region and at the Sawtooth National Forest rather than being allocated to subordinate units, including the SNRA. These funds were held for a variety of region- and forestwide projects. The combined annual impact on the SNRA of withholding these funds was equivalent to less than 4 percent of the SNRA's budget. We found no instances in which funds were allocated to the SNRA and subsequently taken back by the forest or region for other projects.

According to agency officials, it is a common practice for regional and forest offices to retain funds for region- and forestwide projects. The funding for regional projects comes off the top of the regional budget before allocations are made to the forests and subsequently to the ranger districts and recreation areas. As a result, all of the forests, ranger districts, and recreation areas within the region are affected by the funding of these projects. The region responsible for the SNRA had a total of 28 regionwide projects during the 1993-97 period. These projects included improving the geographic information system and computers throughout the region and conducting the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem

Management Project.¹¹ The funds withheld by the region for regionwide projects for the 5-year period totaled about \$37.5 million.

Also during the 1993-97 period, the Sawtooth National Forest withheld funds totaling \$305,000 from the ranger districts and the SNRA for two forestwide projects. Of this amount, \$185,000 was for improving the geographic information system and \$120,000 was for radio replacements. Both of these projects benefited all of the forest's units, including the SNRA. (App. VI lists the totals for region- and forestwide projects for fiscal years 1993-97.)

Funds withheld by the region and the forest reduced the SNRA's budget by less than 4 percent. According to an estimate by the Forest Service Intermountain regional office, if there had been no regionwide projects and the Forest Service had allocated these funds to the SNRA, the Recreation Area would have received, on average, about \$109,000 per year. This represents about 3.4 percent of the area's annual budget for the 1993-97 period. Officials from the forest office told us withholding money for forestwide projects had reduced the SNRA's budget by \$7,400 per year, or about 0.23 percent, on average. Combined, the overall reduction in funds available to the SNRA was \$116,400 per year, or about 3.6 percent. Although the SNRA's budget decreased as a result of these projects, the SNRA also benefited directly from some of the projects, such as those for improving the geographic information system and upgrading radios.

Adverse Impacts on Businesses and Individuals Result Primarily From the SNRA's Conservation Efforts

On February 16, 1998, a field hearing was held in Twin Falls, Idaho, to examine the management of the SNRA.¹² Areas of particular interest at the hearing included the impact of both (1) laws, regulations, and the SNRA's related actions and (2) the SNRA's funding levels on individuals and businesses that are economically dependent on the SNRA. Overall, representatives of the communities that are affected by the SNRA's management said that the Forest Service had done a good job of preserving the values that the SNRA was created to preserve. However,

¹¹The Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project is intended to develop a state-of-the-art management strategy for the lands administered by the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management in the interior Columbia River Basin and portions of the Klamath Basin and the Great Basin. These areas are located primarily in the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho but also include small portions of Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming. The project aims to develop ecosystem management strategies to restore forest and rangeland health while providing sustainable resources and jobs. It also aims to address broad-based problems that cross jurisdictional lines, such as endangered species and species population viability, in one effort, thus saving money and time.

¹²Sawtooth National Recreation Area, Subcommittee on Forests and Public Land Management, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate (S. Hrg. 105-493, Feb. 16, 1998).

these representatives and various businesses and individuals identified a number of adverse impacts on various activities on the SNRA's lands. Businesses and individuals involved in recreational or grazing activities were the most affected by changes in the SNRA's policies and funding. In terms of recreation, outfitters that take visitors on trips through the area on float-boats or on horseback were the most affected; while in terms of grazing, cattle ranchers with grazing allotments on SNRA lands were the most affected. The outfitters and ranchers were affected primarily by restrictions resulting from laws and regulations, such as those protecting the threatened or endangered salmon. Funding levels seemed to also affect individuals and businesses but to a lesser extent than the SNRA's actions to preserve conservation values.

The Forest Service Preserves the Values of the SNRA's Lands

Local public officials and community leaders said that, overall, the SNRA was doing a good job preserving the values it was set up to preserve, such as natural, scenic, historic, and pastoral values, and fish and wildlife. Elected officials from Blaine County, Idaho, and the Director of the Blaine County Recreation District said that the SNRA's management was doing a good job and had maintained good relations with the county. In addition, the Executive Director of the Sawtooth Society, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent organization, said that most people believed that the Forest Service was doing well, overall, in preserving the natural and scenic values it was created to protect.

SNRA Actions Adversely Affect Recreation

According to the river and horseback outfitters we talked with, the SNRA has taken specific actions that are adversely affecting recreation by curtailing (1) float-boating on a portion of the Upper Main Salmon River¹³ (see app. I for a map of the Recreation Area), and (2) stock-supported camping using horses and mules in the Sawtooth Wilderness, which comprises most of the western half of the SNRA.¹⁴ In considering the SNRA's actions and their impacts, it is important to be aware of the changing circumstances affecting the Forest Service's nationwide decision-making. In our 1997 report on the Forest Service's decision-making, we noted that during the last 10 years, the agency has increasingly shifted its emphasis from consumption (primarily producing timber) to conservation (primarily

¹³The Upper Main Salmon River runs from north of Sawtooth City, past the city of Stanley, and then east to the eastern border of the Recreation Area. Float-boating occurs roughly between Buckhorn Bridge and the Torrey's takeout.

¹⁴Stock-supported excursions (using horses, mules, llamas, or goats) allow groups of visitors to explore the wilderness area on horseback, their gear and supplies traveling with them on pack animals.

sustaining fish and wildlife).¹⁵ This shift is taking place in response to requirements in planning and environmental laws and the judicial interpretations of these laws. In particular, section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 represents a congressional design to give greater priority to the protection of endangered species than to the current primary missions of the Forest Service and other federal agencies, such as timber harvesting, rangeland, and outdoor recreation.

In 1991, the National Marine Fisheries Service listed Snake River sockeye salmon as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. In 1992, Snake River spring/summer chinook salmon were listed as threatened. The Salmon River and its tributaries, including those portions running through the SNRA, are designated as part of the critical habitat for threatened spring/summer chinook salmon migration and spawning and for endangered sockeye salmon that migrate up the Salmon River to spawn in Redfish Lake. From 1992 until 1996, the SNRA and the float-boat outfitters worked to develop plans to minimize the impact of float-boating on salmon spawning, which occurs annually from mid-August to late September, in various parts of the Salmon River. In spring 1996, the SNRA completed the final environmental impact statement for the Salmon River Corridor within the SNRA. At that time, it implemented rules to protect spawning salmon. The rules required that on August 21 each year, or earlier if spawning has commenced, the float-boaters must portage (carry) their rafts around a section of the river called Indian Riffles—a traditional spawning area for chinook salmon—and terminate their trips west of Torrey's Hole, another spawning area for chinook salmon. These restrictions required outfitters to provide a truck to portage the rafts, to eliminate the lunch sites three of the outfitters used, and to shorten the trip for all.

We met with three of the four float-boat outfitters operating out of the town of Stanley—the largest town in the SNRA. They asserted that the restrictions on float-boating reduced their revenue and increased their costs of doing business. Because of the many factors that influenced the number of rafters—such as the water level and the weather—the impact of the SNRA's restrictions on the outfitters' revenues is not clear. However, our analysis showed that outfitter revenues for 1996 and 1997, the first years that the new restrictions were in place, were higher than 2 of the 3 prior years. Figures the outfitters provided to the SNRA for the float-boating seasons from 1993 through 1997 indicated that the number of rafters and

¹⁵Forest Service Decision-Making: A Framework for Improving Performance (GAO/RCED-97-71, Apr. 29, 1997).

total revenues generated in 1996 and 1997 were better than in 1993 and 1994 but less than in 1995 when rafting conditions were considered exceptionally good. Table 1 shows the total number of rafters and revenues for 1993 through 1997.

Table 1: Totals for Number of Rafters and Revenue for 1993 Through 1997 in Current Dollars

Fiscal year	Total number of rafters	Total revenue
1993	9,489	\$484,569
1994	7,949	403,713
1995	12,032	624,360
1996	10,461	542,485
1997	10,468	\$555,561

Source: Forest Service data.

We conducted a more detailed analysis for August, the month when the portage rules go into effect. We looked at the figures for the 2-week period before the portage rules were in effect and the 2-week period after portaging began. This analysis showed that for 1996 and 1997, the total revenues and the number of rafters decreased with the imposition of the portage rule. However, we noted that the total revenues and number of rafters also decreased in the latter part of August 1993 when no restrictions were in place.¹⁶ Because revenues appear to decrease whether or not there are restrictions, the impact of the SNRA's restrictions on outfitter revenue is unclear. The outfitters also told us that their costs were increased by the restrictions that require, among other things, that they monitor the river to identify spawning activity and provide a truck and staff to portage their rafts. We did not determine the amount of these costs. As a result, despite the strong revenue picture for recent years, the increased costs resulting from the restrictions may have had a negative impact on the outfitters.

Horse-pack outfitters on the SNRA also have stated that the Recreation Area's actions are hurting their operations economically and reducing the number of people they can serve. In summer 1998, the SNRA amended the Sawtooth National Forest Plan to change the management direction for the Sawtooth Wilderness. The purpose of the changes was to clearly define management objectives, standards, and guidelines to protect and preserve the Sawtooth Wilderness as required by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Rules contained in the revised plan reduced the number of people

¹⁶For 1993, the SNRA was able to provide revenue data for two outfitters and the number of rafters for one other outfitter. For the fourth outfitter, the SNRA provided the number of rafters for 1992.

who can be part of a horse-pack excursion in the wilderness from 20 to 12 and also reduced the number of horses that can be used on each trip.¹⁷

The SNRA reduced the size of horse-pack groups to meet specific objectives of the Wilderness Act that provide that wilderness lands are to be managed so that they generally appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature and that they provide outstanding opportunities for solitude. Hikers complained that their wilderness experience—the opportunity to experience solitude—was degraded when they were confronted with large groups of horseback riders. SNRA officials also said they imposed the restrictions to reduce adverse impacts on trails and campsites. Most trails and campsites in the wilderness area could not withstand the damage caused by large horse-pack groups.

We met with the owner of the largest horse-pack operation in the SNRA. He said that reducing the size of horseback groups has adversely affected his business. However, these adverse effects may be largely mitigated because the reductions are being phased in over a 3-year period and because the SNRA is working with the outfitters to identify a number of campsites that can accommodate up to 20 people. These sites will be dedicated to the outfitters' use, and the outfitters will be able to pre-position supplies at these sites, thus lessening the impact of the requirement that the outfitters use fewer horses on their excursions, a requirement that limits the supplies horse-packing groups can carry with them. Although the outfitters' costs may be somewhat higher for smaller groups, the outfitters will be able to continue accommodating larger groups by breaking them into smaller groups on the trail and reuniting them at their campsites.

SNRA Actions Reduce Grazing

We also spoke with SNRA and local officials, ranchers, and a mining representative about the adverse effects of the Recreation Area's actions on commodity programs—grazing, timber harvesting, and mining.¹⁸ Our discussions suggest that grazing is the commodity program that the SNRA's actions have most affected. Grazing has been reduced around the riparian areas providing the watershed for the Salmon River to protect salmon habitat and to prevent adverse impacts on spawning salmon. Grazing has

¹⁷The reduction covers May 1 to November 30, annually. For the remainder of the year, the person limit stays at 20 and the stock limit is also reduced to 14.

¹⁸In our numerous discussions, we did not identify any adverse effects related to the timber management program, which is a very small program that primarily serves residential needs for firewood and fence posts. Discussions with elected officials in the area suggest that mining in the SNRA is not an issue. The mining program is very small, any potential adverse effects seem limited to only one claim, and even those suggested impacts are not clear.

also been curtailed because cattle and their impacts in campgrounds, in road corridors, and along heavily used recreational trails are unacceptable to many recreational users, according to SNRA officials. Allowing cattle in campgrounds raises water quality issues as well as physical safety issues for campers. In addition, on a national level, the Forest Service has put a high priority on improving the condition of its rangelands so that range conditions meet the legal requirements set out in various laws, regulations, and planning documents. Specifically, the National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires that management plans be prepared for the forests. The plan for the Sawtooth National Forest contains management goals that set the desired future condition of allotments. Forest officials told us they believed that the range conditions established in the forest's plan were not being met.

To meet the plan's objectives, the SNRA reduced grazing on allotments on its lands. These reductions have closed grazing areas, shortened grazing seasons, and increased ranchers' grazing costs. Overall, the SNRA has reduced grazing on allotments by almost one-third. However, some individual allotment reductions have been larger. For example, the ranchers we met with who graze cattle on the Stanley Basin allotment had grazing on their allotments cut by almost 60 percent. These ranchers told us that they had experienced a number of adverse economic impacts as a result. They said that they had decided to sell a portion of their herd and then went into debt to purchase private land for grazing. As a result, the value of their ranches had decreased because the value of a ranch is based partly on the number of cattle that the ranch can support with both its own grazing lands and its federal grazing privileges. SNRA documents note that in the future, grazing may be further reduced when the SNRA completes the required upgrading of its grazing management plans for 10 of the 25 allotments that do not yet have complete management plans.

Declining SNRA Budgets May Also Reduce Recreation and Grazing

According to the SNRA, local government, and other individuals we talked with, the SNRA's declining budgets have also reduced recreational opportunities. Several of them said that as a result of budget restrictions, needed new campsites that have long been in the SNRA's area plan are not being built. As noted previously, the Recreation Area has been unable to construct an additional 663 campsites that were included in its 1975 area plan. Many campers must be turned away during peak periods because there are not enough campsites equipped with facilities such as water, toilets, picnic tables, and grills. Those we spoke with also said that trails and some campsites are poorly maintained and that other trails are not

maintained at all. All these factors either directly limit recreation or discourage recreation by making the experience less enjoyable, according to those we spoke with.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Forest Service for its review and comment. The Forest Service agreed with the overall findings and also provided detailed technical comments clarifying certain aspects of the report. We considered these comments and revised the report as appropriate.

In addition, the Forest Service also commented that we did not fully disclose the Sawtooth National Recreation Area's accomplishments and unmet needs in three areas discussed in the report—recreation, conservation, and commodities. The Forest Service pointed out a number of specific accomplishments and unmet needs that we should add to the report. We added these comments as appropriate.

The Forest Service's letter also said it was unclear how the special funds for recreation construction were handled throughout the report in terms of any accomplishments stemming from these funds. The Forest Service said that since we did not include these construction funds when calculating changes in the Recreation Area's budget because they represented special funding, we should also not have included accomplishments made possible by those funds. We do not believe that our analysis should exclude discussing these accomplishments. As the report points out, the Recreation Area's overall budget decreased by 54 percent and its budget for enhancing recreation decreased by 57 percent from 1993 through 1997. In computing these decreases, we included funds for recreation construction. The report also points out that the rather large decreases of 54 and 57 percent are somewhat misleading because they contain large amounts for special funds, such as construction funds, in certain years. Therefore, to get a truer reading on the decreases in the Recreation Area's budget for the 1993-97 period, we provide an analysis that excluded these types of funds. The accomplishments that we included in the report were those Forest Service officials identified, including some which were paid for with special funds.

The Forest Service also said we should not include the \$260,000 for recreation road construction that the Recreation Area received in 1997 as part of its budget, but instead should treat road construction funds similarly to the other construction funds that were excluded. We agree. As

a result of removing this amount from our analysis, the corrected overall budget decrease for the Recreation Area was about 26 percent over the 1993-97 period. (Had we included the funds, the decrease would have been 16 percent.) In addition, the Forest Service raised questions about whether funds provided through cooperative projects with outside sources, such as state and private organizations, should be included in the total. In designing this study, we worked with Forest Service officials at the region, forest, and Recreation Area to determine the budget fund codes to include. It was agreed at that time that funds for cooperative projects should be included in the Recreation Area's total budget allocation for each year. We further discussed this subject with officials at the Sawtooth National Forest, and they recommended that we not make any revisions in the numbers included in the report. The Forest Service's letter is in appendix VII.

Scope and Methodology

We conducted our work at the Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.; the Forest Service Intermountain Regional Office in Ogden, Utah; the Sawtooth National Forest Office in Twin Falls, Idaho; and the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and the surrounding communities of Stanley and Blaine County. To determine how much was allocated to the SNRA during fiscal years 1993 through 1997, we reviewed the initial and final planning and budget advice documents for the Forest Service, the regional office, the Sawtooth National Forest, and the SNRA. We also reviewed an agency document prepared for our use by the Intermountain Region and the Sawtooth National Forest offices that included all the appropriate budget fund codes. This document was prepared to ensure that we had data that the participating Forest Service units agreed on and considered to be accurate and consistent. We interviewed Forest Service budget officials at the SNRA, the forest office, the region, and at headquarters; the SNRA Area Ranger; and the Sawtooth National Forest Supervisor. To determine the trend in funding from 1993 through 1997 and to put the trend in its historical perspective, we also reviewed the SNRA's budgets for 1991 and 1992 and converted all numbers to constant 1997 dollars. To help explain the large allocation decreases, we identified and removed allocations for 1993 that made that year's budget unusually high and removed funds for construction and land acquisition because funds for these activities vary substantially from year to year depending on whether construction projects or land acquisitions are approved.

To determine whether regional or forest funds had not been allocated to the SNRA or whether funds had been allocated and then taken back during

fiscal years 1993 through 1997 and what was done with those funds, we obtained and compared final budget allocations with expenditures. We also reviewed the allocation change documents for the SNRA and interviewed Forest Service budget officials at the SNRA, the forest office, and the region.

We did not independently verify the reliability of the financial data provided nor did we trace the data to the systems from which they came. These systems were, in some cases, subject to audit procedures by the Department of Agriculture's Office of the Inspector General in connection with the agency's financial statement audits. For fiscal years 1995, 1996, 1997, and previous years, the Office of the Inspector General reported that because of significant internal control weaknesses in various accounting subsystems, the Forest Service's accounting data were not reliable. Despite these weaknesses, we used the data because they were the only data available and are the data that the agency uses to manage its programs.

Because of the portion of the SNRA's budget that enhancing recreation, preserving conservation values, and managing commodity programs account for, we agreed with your office to focus our review of the SNRA's expenditures on these areas. We further agreed that conservation values would include such areas as fish and wildlife, threatened and endangered species, and wilderness management. Similarly, commodity programs would include timber harvesting, grazing, and mining. To determine how much the Recreation Area spent to enhance recreation, to preserve conservation values, and to manage commodity programs, we obtained and reviewed documents showing expenditures for the SNRA. To obtain trends over the 5-year period, we converted all expenditures to constant 1997 dollars, removed special funding allocations from the 1993 budget, and estimated the reduction in expenditures that resulted from the reduced allocations. To identify accomplishments and unmet needs, we relied on information provided to us by the Area Ranger and other officials responsible for the program areas. We also inspected some of the most significant accomplishments.

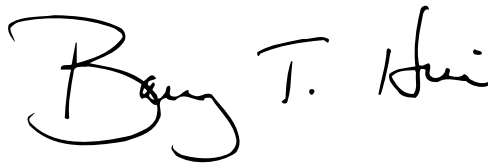
To identify examples of potentially adverse effects of the SNRA's actions on individuals, companies, and communities economically dependent on the area, we reviewed and analyzed the testimony presented at the February 16, 1998, hearing on the SNRA before the Subcommittee on Forests and Public Land Management of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The purpose of the hearing was to examine the

management of the SNRA. On the basis of the data presented in the testimony and our interviews with community groups, local elected officials, and Forest Service officials, we identified the most significantly affected areas in the SNRA. We then interviewed individuals, company representatives, and community officials to obtain their views and related documents on the SNRA's actions and their impacts. Specifically, we met with the following local officials: the mayor of the city of Stanley, the chair of the Stanley Chamber of Commerce, the chairman of the Blaine County Board of Commissioners, and a commissioner from Blaine County. We also met with the following business owners and individuals: float-boat operators, a horse-pack outfitter, ranchers, the director of the Sawtooth Society, and private landowners. Lastly, we discussed the actions and their impacts with SNRA officials and analyzed various data the SNRA provided. We performed our work from June 1998 through December 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report for 10 days after the date of this letter. We will then send copies to the Secretary of Agriculture; the Chief, Forest Service; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others on request.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix VIII.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Barry T. Hill". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Barry T. Hill
Associate Director, Energy,
Resources, and Science Issues

Contents

Letter	1
Appendix I Location of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area	30
Appendix II Partial Forest Service Organization Chart	32
Appendix III Budget Allocations for the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Other Forest Service Units	34
Appendix IV Funds the SNRA Spent for Recreation, Conservation, and Commodity Programs From 1993 Through 1997	36

Appendix V		38
The SNRA's	Enhancing Recreation	38
Accomplishments and	Preserving Conservation Values	39
Unmet Needs for	Managing Commodity Programs	41
Recreation,		
Conservation, and		
Commodity Programs		
Appendix VI		43
Funds Retained at the		
Region and the		
Sawtooth National		
Forest to Fund		
Region- and		
Forestwide Projects		
Appendix VII		44
Comments From the		
Department of		
Agriculture's Forest		
Service		
Appendix VIII		48
Contributors to This		
Report		
Tables	Table 1: Totals for Number of Rafters and Revenue for 1993 Through 1997 in Current Dollars	18
	Table III.1: The SNRA's Budget Allocations, Fiscal Years 1991-97	34
	Table III.2: Final Budget Allocations for Other Forest Service Units, Fiscal Years 1993-97	35
	Table IV.1: The SNRA's Total Spending for Selected Budget Line Items	37

Contents

Table VI.1: Regionwide Projects, Fiscal Years 1993-97	43
Table VI.2: Forestwide Projects, Fiscal Years 1993-97	43

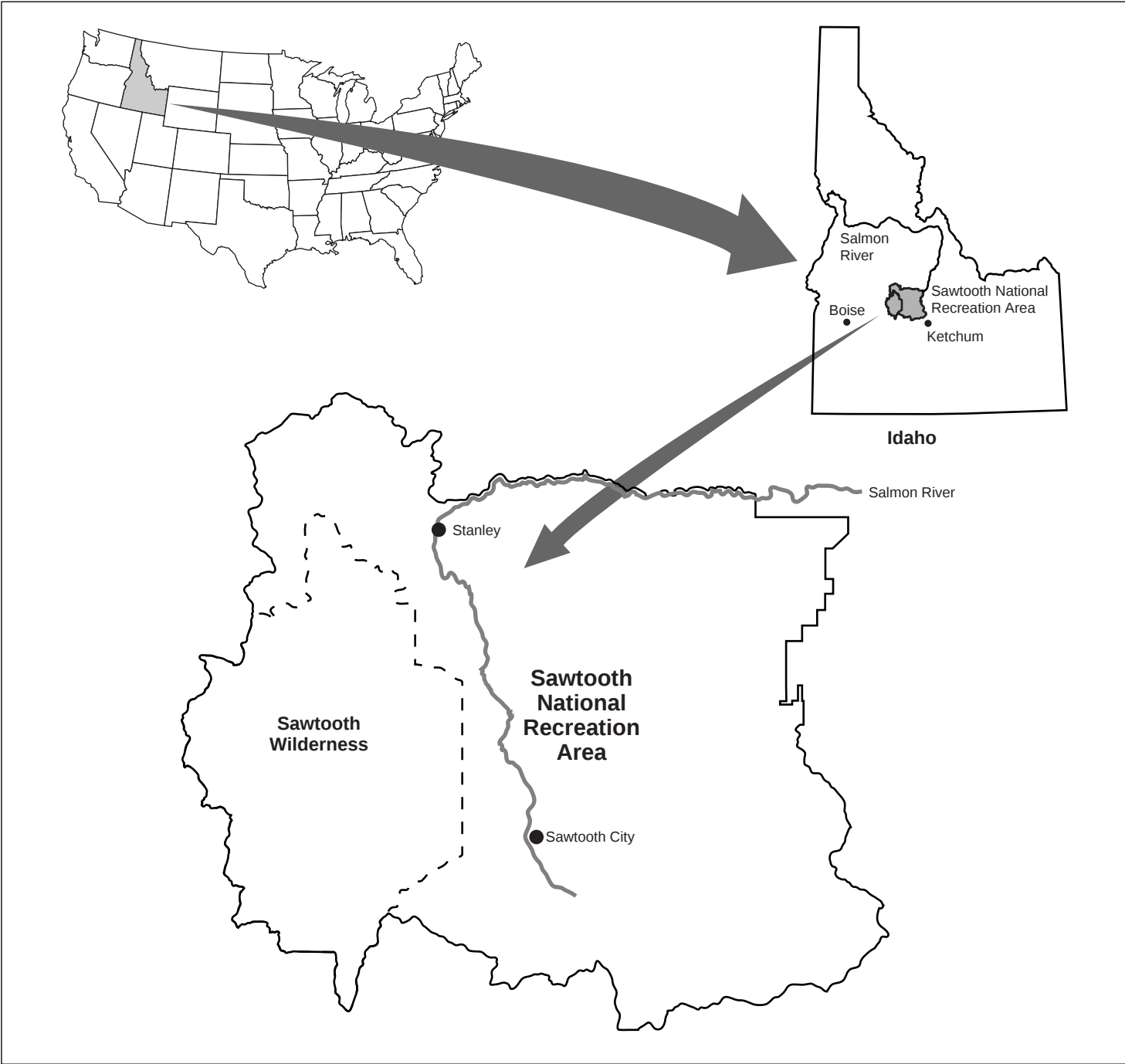
Figures

Figure 1: Trend in the SNRA's Budgets, 1991-97	8
Figure 2: Spending for Recreation, Conservation, and Commodity Programs, 1993-97	10
Figure II.1: Partial Forest Service Organization Chart	33

Abbreviations

SNRA	Sawtooth National Recreation Area
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Location of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area



(Figure notes on next page)

Appendix I
Location of the Sawtooth National
Recreation Area

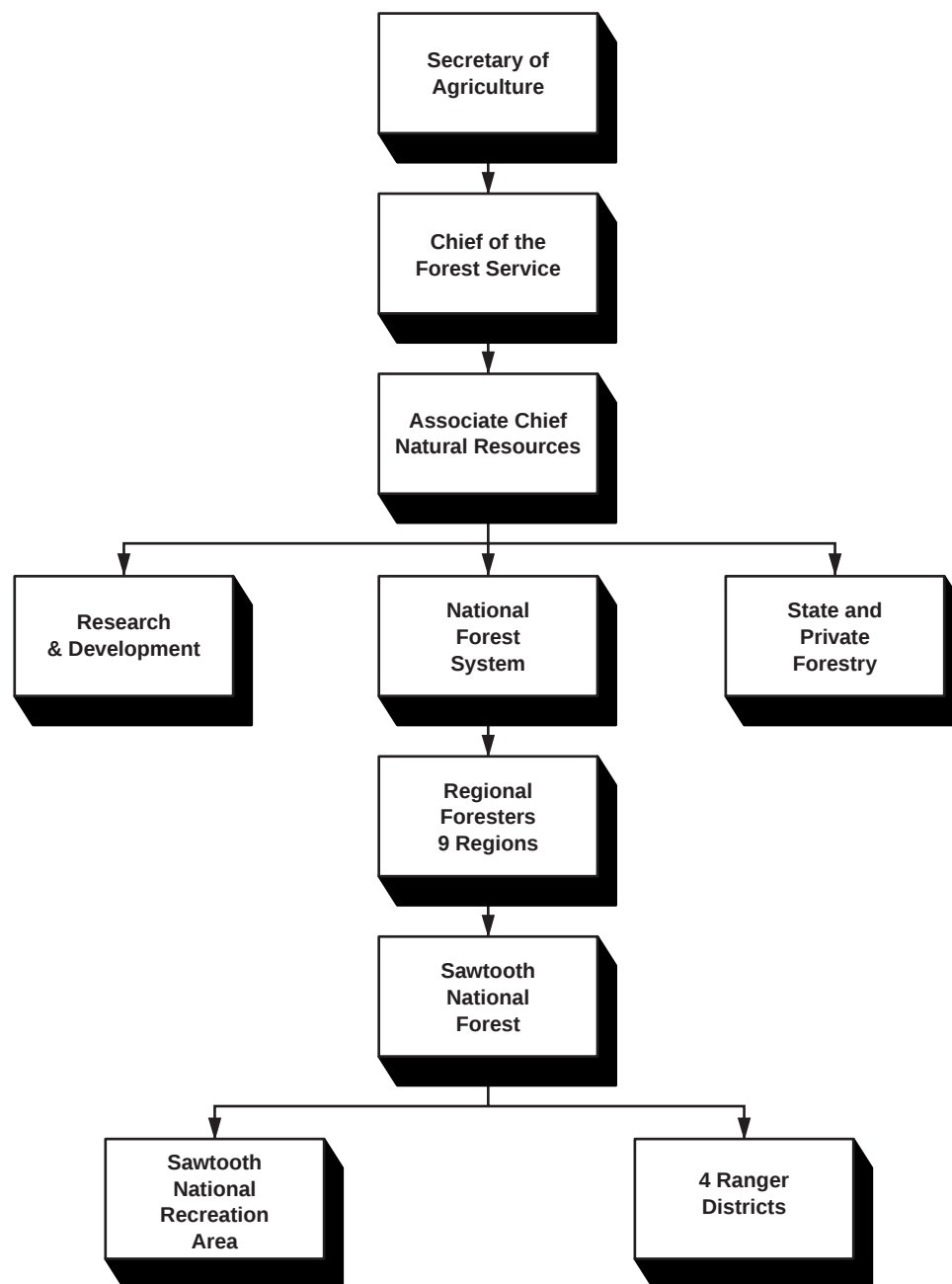
Note: The Sawtooth Wilderness is part of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area.

Source: Final Environmental Impact Statement, Salmon River Corridor, SNRA.

Partial Forest Service Organization Chart

This organization chart highlights the position of the Sawtooth National Forest and the Sawtooth National Recreation Area within the Forest Service.

Figure II.1: Partial Forest Service
Organization Chart



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Budget Allocations for the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Other Forest Service Units

This appendix presents information on budgets for the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA) and for other Forest Service units. Table III.1 provides the SNRA’s budget allocations for fiscal years 1991 through 1997, with and without special funds. Special funds include funds from the multiyear recreation initiative and funds for construction and land acquisition. Table III.2 provides the final budget allocations for the Sawtooth National Forest, the Forest Service Region 4 (the Intermountain Region), and the Forest Service nationwide for fiscal years 1993 through 1997.

Table III.1: The SNRA’s Budget Allocations, Fiscal Years 1991-97

1997 constant dollars				
Fiscal year	SNRA budget (millions)	Year-to-year percentage change	SNRA budget without special funds (millions)	Year-to-year percentage change
1991	\$2.9791	•	\$1.7174	•
1992 ^a	7.1663	140.6	2.9287	70.5
1993	4.8792	–31.9	2.6848	–8.3
1994	3.1423	–35.6	2.8474	6.1
1995 ^b	2.6821	–14.6	2.6821	–5.8
1996	3.1281	16.6	2.1439	–20.1
1997	\$2.2531	–28.0	\$1.9931	–7.0
Percentage change (1993-97)	–53.8	•	–25.8	•

^aIn fiscal year 1992, the SNRA received \$2.73 million in land acquisition funds for the purchase of the Busterback Ranch.

^bFiscal year 1995 did not have any special funds.

Source: Forest Service data.

Appendix III
Budget Allocations for the Sawtooth
National Recreation Area and Other Forest
Service Units

**Table III.2: Final Budget Allocations for
Other Forest Service Units, Fiscal
Years 1993-97**

1997 constant dollars in millions			
Fiscal year	Sawtooth National Forest	Region 4	Forest Service Nationwide
1993	\$13.690	\$210.028	\$3,192
1994	12.228	202.318	3,004
1995	11.745	224.768	3,150
1996	11.013	201.830	2,701
1997	11.251	206.673	2,802
Percentage change (1993-97)	-17.8	-1.6	-12.2

Source: Forest Service data.

Funds the SNRA Spent for Recreation, Conservation, and Commodity Programs From 1993 Through 1997

Table IV.1 shows the funds the SNRA spent to enhance recreation, preserve conservation values, and manage commodity programs for fiscal years 1993 through 1997. The figures shown in the table include those from funds allocated for special projects, such as the funds for the multiyear recreation initiative and for the construction of recreation facilities. A large portion of the decrease in the SNRA's spending from 1993 through 1997 may be explained by the loss of special funding or the creation of additional budget line items that shifted funds from line item to line item. For example, spending for enhancing recreation decreased about 57 percent from 1993 through 1997. A significant portion of the decrease occurred because the recreation initiative, which provided additional funding in 1992 and 1993, ended in 1993, and because the SNRA had recreation facilities construction funds in 1993 but did not have such construction funds to spend in 1997. If these items are excluded from the analysis, the decrease in spending for enhancing recreation is about 19 percent rather than 57 percent.

Appendix IV
Funds the SNRA Spent for Recreation,
Conservation, and Commodity Programs
From 1993 Through 1997

Table IV.1: The SNRA's Total Spending for Selected Budget Line Items

1997 constant dollars in thousands

SNRA budget line item	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	Percentage change (1993-97)	Estimated percentage change without special funds (1993-97)
Enhance recreation							
Recreation management ^a	\$1,283.8	\$1,129.1	\$663.9	\$781.3	\$783.1	-39.0	
Recreation facilities construction	426.4	29.0	0.9	456.1	0.0	-100.0	
Trail construction	119.9	68.4	87.4	75.7	0.0	-100.0	
Total for recreation	\$1,830.0	\$1,226.5	\$752.2	\$1,313.2	\$783.1	-57.2	-19.3
Preserve conservation values							
Wildlife and fisheries habitat management	\$370.0	\$488.4	\$291.6	\$267.0	\$218.9	-40.8	
Wilderness management ^a	216.2	180.9	227.8	151.4	163.3	-24.5	
Ecosystem management ^b	0.0	0.0	438.9	164.0	79.0	•	
Total for conservation	\$586.2	\$669.3	\$958.2	\$582.4	\$461.2	-21.3	-8.7
Manage commodity programs							
Rangeland management	\$135.4	\$181.7	\$54.2	\$25.7	\$68.1	-49.7	
Forestland management	91.2	26.8	13.2	34.5	36.0	-60.5	
Minerals and geology management	26.6	24.9	37.7	39.7	37.5	41.0	
Total for commodity programs	\$253.2	\$233.4	\$105.1	\$99.9	\$141.6	-44.1	4.4

^aFor fiscal year 1993 and 1994, we have added \$79,300 and \$93,400 to recreation management and \$34,100 and \$39,800 to the wilderness program, respectively. These funds are from the trail maintenance budget line item that was eliminated in fiscal 1995; the funds were distributed between the recreation management and wilderness management programs. We distributed the funds based on a Forest Service headquarters formula under which 70 percent went to recreation management and the remaining 30 percent went to wilderness management.

^bIn fiscal year 1995, the Forest Service created the ecosystem planning, inventory, and monitoring budget line item and funded it by shifting funds from other budget and extended budget line items such as recreation management. This budget line item is currently called land management planning, inventory, and monitoring, and it funds the ecosystem management program.

Source: Forest Service data.

The SNRA's Accomplishments and Unmet Needs for Recreation, Conservation, and Commodity Programs

Officials at the SNRA identified a number of accomplishments and unmet needs in their programs for enhancing recreation, preserving conservation values, and managing commodity programs. The following are examples of specific accomplishments and unmet needs for each area.

Enhancing Recreation

Accomplishments

- In 1994, the SNRA transferred the management of its recreational facilities to a concessionaire. SNRA officials said this transfer allows them to provide the same recreational services to the public at one-third the cost to the SNRA and with one-third the SNRA staff.
- The SNRA completed the renovation of a major campground at Redfish Lake (a scenic and popular camping area) in 1996 through a funding partnership in which the state of Idaho paid \$285,000 of the project's \$777,000 cost. The major renovations included larger paved campsites to accommodate the larger recreational vehicles now in use, upgraded restrooms, and numerous erosion and vegetation improvements. This campground experiences nearly 100-percent occupancy during much of the high-use season.
- In 1997, the SNRA awarded a contract to construct a trail that will run through an 18-mile stretch in the SNRA. When completed, this trail will be used for hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing. Large portions of the cost of this project are being covered by the state and by private contributions.

Unmet Needs

- The SNRA has not been able to construct an additional 663 campsites that have been in its area plan since 1975. According to Forest Service officials, the SNRA is unable to meet the public's demand for camping accommodations or to rotate campsites to allow for them to recover from heavy use.
- The SNRA has been unable to maintain about one-third of its 750 miles of trails. The trails require regular maintenance to remove fallen trees, cut back undergrowth, and repair erosion and use damage. Unmaintained and closed trails reduce the recreational experience of visitors to the SNRA and increase costs to horse-pack outfitters who must use some of their own resources to make trails safe and usable for their trips.
- The SNRA has 130 recreational residences (summer homes), 8 organization camps, and 4 resorts authorized under special uses. Prior to 1997, nearly

all of these facilities were inspected annually to ensure compliance with the special use permits. In 1997, when funds for fire protection were moved from the SNRA to the Ketchum Ranger District, the SNRA also lost the position for the person who had done the inspections. As a result, only about one-third of the residences are now inspected annually. In addition, the SNRA is unable to process requests for permit modifications because it does not have the staff to perform the required analysis of the impacts these modifications might have. Therefore, deviations from the permits can occur and go undetected, and some of these deviations could have significant adverse impacts on area resource values such as endangered species habitat.

- The SNRA has not been able to keep its visitor information desks open to provide adequate service for its more than 1 million visitors each year. The days and hours of operation have been reduced, and in 1996, the Redfish Lake Visitor Center was closed, causing a loss of service to the 18,000 people who visited the center during its average 2-1/2 month season.
- The SNRA decreased customer service crews by approximately one-third between 1993 and 1997. These staff are the SNRA's primary contact in the field with the visiting public, and they are responsible for visitor assistance, education and interpretation, compliance, and search and rescue assistance.
- The SNRA has cut back interpretive programs at all locations because of a lack of staff and program supplies and equipment.
- Inadequate funding has prevented the SNRA from doing any meaningful travel management or dispersed recreation management to deal with the increasing conflicts between many of the dispersed recreation uses, such as skiers and snowmobilers, and motorized and nonmotorized trail users.
- Construction funds have been unavailable since 1993 to improve aging interpretive exhibits at the Headquarters and Redfish Lake visitor centers.
- The Redfish Lake Visitor Center needs extensive repair work to keep it functionally sound and requires considerable remodeling to make it accessible.

Preserving Conservation Values

Accomplishments

- In 1996, the SNRA completed the final environmental impact statement for the Salmon River Corridor—a 30-mile length of the Salmon River from its source around the community of Smiley Creek to the eastern border of the

SNRA. The statement identified direct measures to protect salmon, primarily by improving habitat, maintaining or improving water quality, restricting float-boating activities to prevent the disturbance of spawning, and curtailing other water-related recreation activities during the critical spawning season for both sockeye and chinook salmon.

- The SNRA reestablished the migration route for salmon trying to return to Alturas Lake to spawn by increasing the water flow along Alturas Lake Creek and removing an irrigation diversion that was blocking the migration. The work was done through a partnership project in which the SNRA paid for the removal of the irrigation diversion from Alturas Lake Creek with \$13,000 provided by the Bonneville Power Administration in 1997. The Idaho Fish and Game Department provided about \$50,000 in 1998 to develop a well source to provide replacement water for the landowner who had been using water from the creek for irrigation. The landowner installed a replacement irrigation system at an estimated cost of \$50,000. The Forest Service's funding for the project was limited to its staff's salaries for participation and oversight of the negotiations.
- The SNRA developed and issued a wilderness management plan in which it updated the standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan and clearly defined the management objectives for the Sawtooth Wilderness to address the impacts from increasing numbers of visitors and more intensive use. The SNRA also issued a prescribed natural fire plan for the wilderness in 1997. The plan provides criteria under which fires started by natural causes, such as lightning, can be allowed to burn, the objectives to be achieved with such burns, and the requirements for monitoring and controlling such fires.
- The SNRA completed Endangered Species Act consultations for all ongoing activities after chinook and sockeye salmon and steelhead and bull trout were listed under the act.

Unmet Needs

- From 1995 to 1997, the SNRA was unable to conduct broad-level surveys of habitat condition or species distribution. Consequently, without updated field surveys, the SNRA is not able to effectively assess the effects of forest management activities on species or habitat to effectively manage, protect, or recover listed species.
- The routine maintenance of trails in the Sawtooth Wilderness has not been performed as needed. In 1993, 195 miles (82 percent) of trails in the Sawtooth Wilderness were maintained, while in 1997, only 122 miles (51 percent) of the trails were maintained. The reduction of maintenance directly correlates to the decrease in trail crew size from 15 people in 1993 to 5 people in 1997. The reduction in trail maintenance has led to (1) trail

damage and increased impacts due to soil erosion, (2) decreased visitor satisfaction, and (3) increased hazards because visitors are forced to find other routes around fallen trees.

- The SNRA has been prevented by inadequate funding from completing conservation agreements that allow for proactive management for species prior to the species' being listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Managing Commodity Programs

Accomplishments

- The SNRA reported that almost all of the formerly degraded riparian habitat on allotments has been allowed to recover to levels that benefit various fish populations. The recovery occurred because of rigorous compliance with standards, changes in grazing management, and new fencing to prevent cows and sheep from grazing in riparian areas.
- The SNRA contracted in 1995-96 with the Idaho Geological Survey to complete abandoned mine surveys for chemical and physical hazards at 44 sites and, between 1995 and 1997, reclaimed three abandoned mine sites and one mining road.

Unmet Needs

- Because of funding shortages, the SNRA did not have staff to consult with the National Marine Fisheries Service on the appropriateness of using newly acquired land for grazing. Completing the consultation process might have resulted in additional lands being opened to grazing, according to an SNRA official. The new lands would have compensated for reductions in grazing elsewhere.
- The SNRA has been unable to meet the schedule mandated in the 1995 Recissions Bill for the Forest Service to meet requirements set out in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. All forests are required to have updated allotment management plans that set out how grazing allotments will be brought up to and maintained at conditions that meet the direction, standards, and guidelines in the forests' land and resources management plans.
- The SNRA has been unable to contain infestations of noxious weeds. Consequently, the weeds are spreading more rapidly, with a resulting loss in land productivity for grazing.
- Because the limited funding for range programs must be spent primarily on monitoring compliance with the terms and conditions of Biological

Appendix V
The SNRA's Accomplishments and Unmet
Needs for Recreation, Conservation, and
Commodity Programs

Opinions under the Endangered Species Act, the needs for completing or revising allotment management plans and for interacting with permittees cannot be fully met.

Funds Retained at the Region and the Sawtooth National Forest to Fund Region- and Forestwide Projects

The Forest Service's Region 4 and the Sawtooth National Forest withheld funds from the SNRA for region- and forestwide projects. Table VI.1 lists some of the regionwide projects and the total dollar amounts for fiscal years 1993 through 1997. Similarly, table VI.2 lists the forestwide projects and dollar amounts for the same period.

Table VI.1: Regionwide Projects, Fiscal Years 1993-97

1997 constant dollars in thousands

Regionwide projects	FY 1993	FY 1994	FY 1995	FY 1996	FY 1997	Total ^a
Computer Enhancement/ Geographic Information System	\$3,846	\$3,478	\$919	\$2,551	\$4,000	\$14,794
Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project	0	0	2,245	561	780	3,586
2002 Winter Olympics	0	0	0	0	655	655
Water Rights Adjudication ^b	474	0	1,613	1,387	1,040	4,514
Timber Inventory ^c	654	516	469	583	703	2,925
Regional Forester Emergency	275	257	0	255	250	1,037
All Other Regionwide Projects	3,157	1,762	1,297	2,005	1,756	9,977
Total^a	\$8,405	\$6,014	\$6,543	\$7,342	\$9,184	\$37,488

^aNumbers may not add up because of rounding.

^bThe figure for fiscal year 1993 is for the Snake River Adjudication project.

^cThe figure for fiscal year 1995 is for a vegetation inventory. The figures for fiscal years 1996 and 1997 are for an integrated ecosystem inventory.

Source: Forest Service data.

Table VI.2: Forestwide Projects, Fiscal Years 1993-97

1997 constant dollars in thousands

Forestwide projects	FY 1993	FY 1994	FY 1995	FY 1996	FY 1997	Total
Radio Replacement	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$120.0	\$120.0
Geographic Information System	108.8	30.1	8.3	37.8	0.0	185.0
Total	\$108.8	\$30.1	\$8.3	\$37.8	\$120.0	\$305.0

Source: Forest Service data.

Comments From the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
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File Code: 1420

Date: JAN 14 1999

Mr. Barry T. Hill
Associate Director
Energy, Resources and Science Issues
United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Hill:

Enclosed are our comments on the GAO Draft Report "National Forests: Funding the Sawtooth National Recreation Area." If you would like to discuss any of our comments, call Liz Close, Program Leader for Congressionally Designated Areas, at (202) 205-1701.

Sincerely,


CLYDE THOMPSON
Deputy Chief for Business Operations

Enclosure

cc:
Liz Close, WO
SNRA
Andrea Fowler, WO

**Response to GAO's Draft Report
"National Forests: Funding the sawtooth National Recreation Area"**

January 12, 1998

Comments were originally provided to GAO on December 18, 1998, in response to the Statement of Facts. Most have been incorporated into the draft report. Additional comments on the draft follow.

Now on p. 2.

Page 3 - Results in Brief - First paragraph minimizes the SNRA's accomplishments. Disregards day to day and other accomplishments by only mentioning on a handful of bigger ones.

Ending statement in paragraph 1: It is stated that the SNRA has unmet needs to construct 663 additional campsites. This is not all. In addition, the lack of funding has impeded reconstruction or rehabilitation of deteriorating developed facilities, such as visitor centers, trailheads, camp or day use facilities.

Now on p. 12.

Page 15 - Preserving Conservation Values - While not paid for with fish, wildlife, threatened and endangered species, or wilderness funds, there have been other significant accomplishments toward 'preserving conservation values', e.g. changes in grazing programs, elimination and or relocation of recreation sites/facilities/trails from riparian areas, road closures, special provisions in land use authorizations, etc., all paid for under the 'benefitting function' concept.

Also, a significant accomplishment was completion of ESA consultations for all ongoing activities upon the listings of Chinook salmon, Sockeye salmon, steelhead, and bulltrout. These consultations resulted in considerable mitigation tied to many uses and activities in the name of preserving conservation values.

Now on p. 12.

Page 15 - Managing Commodity Programs - From SNRA budget data from 1993, we are unable to identify \$120,000 allocated to the Recreation Area for four special projects.

Now on p. 13.

Page 19 - SNRA Actions Adversely Affect Recreation - Statement (1) is misleading/confusing. While the Salmon River runs from north of Sawtooth City to the eastern boundary of the Recreation Area, the floatboating section is much shorter, roughly from the Buckhorn Bridge to the Torrey's takeout.

Now on p. 16.

Page 24 - SNRA Actions Reduce Grazing - First paragraph, the SNRA has not reduced grazing allotments. There have been some reductions in permitted livestock numbers.

Now on p. 19.

Page 25 - Declining SNRA Budgets May Also Reduce Recreation and Grazing - A statement is made that many campers must be turned away during peak periods because there are not enough campsites to accommodate them. This information should be clarified by adding that there may be additional need for "developed" campsite facilities, equipped with water, toilets, picnic tables and grills. There are adequate "dispersed or undeveloped" campsites available in the SNRA.

Now on p. 20.

Page 27 - Scope and Methodology Section - Last paragraph, the reference to the "town" of Stanley should be changed to "city" of Stanley.

**Appendix VII
Comments From the Department of
Agriculture's Forest Service**

Now on p. 34.

Page 33 - Appendix III, Table III.1 - The fiscal year 1997 total includes \$260,000 in Recreation Road Construction, which probably should have been removed from the 1997 total, as recreation construction was similarly removed in other years. This table also include in its totals for each year funds under the fund code CWFS. CWFS does not represent an allocation, only the authority to spend money from other outside sources. Including these amounts, provides a misleading total concerning total allocations to the Recreation Area.

Now on p. 39.

Page 39 - Appendix V, Preserving Conservation Values, Accomplishments - The first paragraph states that the source of the Salmon River is near the "town of Stanley". This is incorrect and should read similar to a previous reference which states that the source of the Salmon River is close to the community of "Smiley Creek".

Now on p. 40.

Page 40 - Appendix V, Preserving Conservation Values, Unmet Needs - Paragraph two on Page 40 states that the SNRA was unable to conduct survey clearances for projects to ensure that they do not adversely impact species. This information is a little misleading as some individual projects have been reviewed and evaluated. The SNRA was unable to conduct broad level surveys of habitat condition or species distribution. Consequently, without updated field surveys, the SNRA is not able to effectively assess the effects of forest management activities on species or habitat to effectively manage, protect or recover listed species.

Appendix V, Preserving Conservation Values, Unmet Needs - Inadequate funding has prevented the completion of conservation agreements, which allow for pro-actively management for species prior to their listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Now on p. 41.

Page 41 - Appendix V, Managing Commodity Programs, Unmet Needs - Paragraph three on Page 41. states the SNRA has been unable to build fences around camping areas, and as a result, has had to reduce permitted livestock numbers. In the Stanley Basin, much fencing was accomplished to effectively reduce conflict with developed recreation use. Reductions in grazing allotment acres were implemented for protection and recovery of riparian areas (some use may also coincide with recreation trails). It was simply neither cost effective, nor desirable to construct extensive fencing in these extensive riparian meadows. The extra AUM's obtained would be minimal and at a great expense.

General comments:

1. It is unclear from the report how recreation construction money was handled throughout. Initially, all figures are controlled to remove special funding and construction funds found in 1992. However, recreation construction projects are then included in accomplishments, e.g. new trail construction, Harriman trail construction, Outlet campground construction.
2. To accurately reflect accomplishments and unmet needs in three specific areas, another factor should be considered. Reductions in some other fund codes, e.g. NFLA, GA, LALW, etc., have required greater reliance on recreation and other examined funds to cover a higher percentage of fixed costs and multi-funded personnel (receptionist, payroll, public affairs, landscape architect etc.). This has a direct affect on accomplishments in the three identified areas and also contributes to more unmet needs.

Enhancing Recreation-Unmet Needs

- The SNRA has not been able to keep its Visitor Information desks open to provide adequate service for its 1 million-plus visitors. Days and hours of operation have been reduced and volunteers are heavily relied on for staffing. Redfish Lake Visitor Center was closed in 1996 due to lack of funding, a loss of service to the 18,000 people who visit the center during its average 2 1/2 month season.

- Customer service crews have decreased by approximately one third during this period. These crews are the primary contact in the field with the visiting public. They are responsible for visitor assistance, education and interpretation, compliance, and search and rescue assistance.

- Interpretive programs have been cut back at all locations due to lack of staff and program supplies and equipment. Most of the AV equipment on the SNRA is at least 20 years old and in need of repair or replacement. It has been difficult to provide educational materials and brochures to the public to enhance their enjoyment of this special area.

- User conflicts are increasing between many of the dispersed recreation uses, e.g. skiers/snowmobilers and motorized/non-motorized trail users. Inadequate funding has prevented the SNRA from doing any meaningful travel management or dispersed recreation management.

- The interpretive exhibits at both the Headquarters Visitor Center and Redfish Lake Visitor Center show signs of their age (1977 and 1963, respectively). A Visitor Center Prospectus was written in 1992 and conceptual plans for remodeling facilities were completed by an exhibits design firm in 1993 but construction dollars were not available to carry out the plans.

- Redfish Lake Visitor Center was built in 1963 and has not been upgraded or remodeled in any major fashion since then. While annual patches and fixes have kept the visitor center operational, the building is in need of some extensive repair work just to keep it functionally sound and requires some considerable remodeling to make it accessible.

Managing Commodity Programs - Unmet Needs

- Inadequate funding for range programs has, under the 'benefiting function' concept, required the focus of limited range funds primarily on monitoring for compliance with terms and conditions of Biological Opinions under the Endangered Species Act. Only limited effort can then be made toward completing or revising allotment management plans and permittee interactions.

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